NEW YORK METRO SUPPLEMENT

Film Makers On Hot Topics

PENNY PERKINS

Somewhere in the labyrinth of respectful WNET/Channel Thirteen, an independent production company works to make films about events and issues overlooked or ignored by mainstream media. Daedalus Productions is the official name for the whirlwind of administrative, fundraising and production activity orchestrated by Nina Rosenblum and Alexandra White. "We see our job as providing a different representation than is available through the conventional media," states Rosenblum. Their latest production, **Through the Wire**, a riveting documentary about the abuse of women political prisoners by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, is a quintessential example of their filmmaking philosophy.

The film itself and the events and conditions it depicts have already received a good deal of media attention, and for good reason. The plight of Silvia Baraldini, Susan Rosenberg and Alejandrina Torres, the three political prisoners featured in the film, and the psychological and physical torment these activists have endured, is both shocking and engrossing. Publications such as **The Nation, The New York Times, Mirabella, International Documentary** and **On the Issues**, among others, have recorded some of the story unearthed by Rosenblum and White (and a coalition of activists) exposing the Bureau of Prison's (BOP) mission to break the will of these women in the hopes that they will renounce their political beliefs. At the same time, the BOP has denied that the prisoners' treatment was politically motivated.

Through the Wire contrasts BOP assertions with fact. It documents the creation of a small group isolation unit, specifically used to house women whom the government of the United States considers dangerous to its foreign and domestic policies. Initially located in the basement of the federal prison in Lexington, Ky, the so-called High Security Unit (HSU) used techniques including sensory deprivation, isolation, sexual abuse and constant video surveillance to achieve its "mission."

The filmmaker's Herculean efforts to make the film—the resistance people had to its disclosures, the disbelief encountered even in the face of indisputable evidence—reveals a story parallel to the prisoners' relation to the American justice system. "At the beginning," Rosenblum recalls, "we would take some tape to a potential backer or interested producer. After viewing it, they would simply say, 'I don't believe this.' I can't even remember how many times that happened."

One time that didn't happen is when ABC/TV screened preliminary footage it had asked Rosenblum to put together for its program, 20/20. The producers of 20/20, no doubt, believed what they saw. But the material gathered was so explosive (and damning to the government) that ABC cancelled its scheduled showing. A few months later—after the HSU had already been closed and a federal judge had ruled that the BOP had violated the prisoners' First Amendment rights—NBC agreed to air a substantially shorter version of the piece on its **Today Show**. But even this seven-minute version was enough to jolt audiences out of their early-morning stupor.

"It was only after the story broke on the **Today Show**," White comments, "that we were finally able to get people to believe that this outrageous treatment was going on. And only after the court case did a little more financial support come in. As you can imagine, there were absolutely no government funds available for a documentary with this kind of subject matter." Fortunately, the Kentucky Foundation for Women gave them a substantial grant at the beginning of the project which was able to sustain them through the period of "disbelief."

Through the Wire—shown at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival in February—was first screened in New York City on December 12, 1989, in celebration of International Human Rights Day. Original Cinema, a film distribution company, will air the documentary in approximately 15 cities throughout the country, beginning in the spring. Amnesty International is taking an active role in distributing the film; the human rights organization will help with promotion through local chapters and may coordinate benefits for some opening nights. For a hard-hitting documentary about an uncomfortable subject, these are impressive coups.

Daedalus Productions, Inc.

NINA ROSENBLUM and ALEXANDRA WHITE

Personal Commitment

A few days after the premiere, the satisfied but exhausted Rosenblum and White reflected on some of their motivations for making the film, and speculated on where they might apply their energies in the future. "We initially got involved in the project," Rosenblum explains, "when an attorney from the same firm that represents me in film matters asked me to edit a videotape of an interview of one of her clients, Susan Rosenberg." The tape Rosenblum had been asked to cut was to be used as evidence in Rosenberg's sentence reduction hearing. Rosenberg had been in the HSU barely three months and already the effects were staggering. Like the majority of people who come across this story, Rosenblum was compelled to delve into the matter further. "There was no way, after cutting that tape, that I could just say goodbye to this woman's plight and the story behind it," Rosenblum says. "I'm familiar with the history of 'adjustment centers'—that is, brainwashing. And what I saw on that tape reminded me all too closely of what I know about other torture centers in Germany and South Africa."

That was in the spring of 1987. Soon afterward, Rosenblum and White were fully enmeshed in the massive research and fundraising a project like **Through the Wire** requires. One of the most compelling and draining aspects of this project, they both agreed, was the emotional toll this work took. There was an indisputable bonding with the women prisoners and an empathy for their situation—feelings complicated by knowing that, in all likelihood, these activists will spend the rest of their lives incarcerated. "The hardest part was realizing at some point," Rosenblum acknowledges, "that these women could have been the people we grew up with or went to school with."

One of their goals when they began this project was to make the secretive High Security Units a public issue. By that criteria alone, their work has already been tremendously successful. Besides the showing on NBC's **Today Show** (which stimulated public debate on HSU's and the prison system in general), other results of the film include a pending resolution by the American Psychological Association to stop psychological torture (such as was experienced by the HSU prisoners). A similar resolution is being sponsored by New York City Councilman Robert Dryfoos.

In addition to recuperating from the actual shooting and post production of **Through the Wire**, Rosenblum and White are now in the midst of promoting and distributing the film. In addition to the Berlin Film Festival, Rosenblum and White spent most of February touring with the film through several eastern European cities and capitals. Rosenblum intends to spend much of the upcoming year at festivals and on the college lecture circuit. At the same time, they are also rolling up their sleeves to work on several projects still in the research and development stages. One of these is a feature documentary entitled **Liberators**, about the Black tank battalion that liberated the Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps. Another project, **City of Heartbreak**, will be an hour-long documentary on the Photo League, an organization of social photographers who documented New York in the 30s and 40s.

Founded in 1980 by Rosenblum and her husband, Daniel Alfentuck, for the explicit purpose of making social documentaries, Daedalus Productions focuses on issues important to women, minorities and the poor. Since 1987 Daedalus has been housed at WNET Channel Thirteen with Rosenblum and White as its only staffers. Even though they have just finished an extremely important film and have several more educational documentaries in the works, both Rosenblum and White express a desire to take on a commercial project. It comes as no surprise that the constant tyranny of fundraising and promoting socially-responsible films in an unabashedly entertainment-hungry market exhausts even the most dedicated social commentators. "We would consider it a luxury right now to do a film that doesn't take twice as much time to promote and finance as it does to actually make," Rosenblum admits.

For Daedalus Productions it will be a rest well deserved.

Chamber of Horrors

There comes a point about half-way into **Through the Wire**—a chilling expose of the abuses an unsupervised Federal Bureau of Prisons levies on political prisoners—when you realize how any real opposition to the American way of life is completely abhorred and actively punished by a government which defines and carefully maintains that standard in the first place. Maybe it's the way in which the icy blue eyes of the warden glaze over as he pretends not to understand the interviewer's question, "Why are these women here?" Or maybe it's the unconscionable effects of isolation and abuse etched onto the gray faces of the three political prisoners held in the High Security Unit (HSU) in Lexington, Ky. Whatever the exact sequence of images that produces the effect, one leaves this feature-length documentary with the last of one's illusions about political freedom in this country profoundly shaken, and none of one's complacency left intact.

On one level, **Through the Wire** is a harrowing account of the abuses (or, more correctly stated, tortures) endured by Silvia Baraldini, Susan Rosenberg and Alejandrina Torres—three life-long activists who each took a personal and political stance against specific policies of the U.S. government (e.g., the invasion of Grenada, racist attacks by the police in cities across the country and the colonization of Puerto Rico). From this perspective, the film is an unflinching portrait of the tragedy befalling three individuals because of their ideological convictions.

On a broader level, **Through the Wire** provides a haunting picture of the consequences meted out by a government which has little tolerance for opposition to its status quo, even as it pays ample patriotic lip service to difference and democracy. When, as this film documents, men who bomb abortion clinics get seven years (with a good deal of that time spent on probation), and women like Susan Rosenberg get 58 years for possessing, not using, weapons and explosives, it becomes morally impossible to argue that the underlying political philosophy of this country is "freedom and justice for all."

This latest film from Daedalus Productions (read: Nina Rosenblum and Alexandra White) depicts a chamber of horrors so blatant in its denial of basic human and civil rights that an Amnesty International investigation found the prisoner's conditions "deliberately and gratuitously oppressive," and their treatment, based on their political beliefs, "cruel, inhuman, and degrading." Federal District Judge Barrington Parker ruled on July 15, 1988 that the Federal Bureau of Prisons had violated the prisoner's First Amendment rights and that their treatment had "skirted elemental standards of human decency." Unfortunately, Judge Parker's ruling was overturned on appeal, and as many as 16 new control units, modelled on Lexington are now under construction. A maximum security unit in Marianna, Fl., has already given some activists and criminal experts cause for concern regarding its political use as a unit for political prisoners.

Through the Wire is an important film, bringing many of the contradictions, misleading rhetoric and just plain lies of our government's censorship, media manipulation and political intolerance to light. If you ever thought—or still think—that torture of political prisoners is an activity reserved for dictators of non-Western countries, then you owe it to yourself, and your extant belief in a democratic system, to see the atrocities committed by the United States Federal Bureau of Prisons—all in the name of "justice."

—P.P.

Through the Wire will be released for a limited theatrical run in approximately 15 cities throughout the country in the spring. It will also premiere on international television on Channel Four, Great Britain, followed by a national public television special on WNET/Thirteen. For information regarding upcoming screenings or rental copies of **Through the Wire**, contact Daedalus Productions, WNET/Thirteen, 356 West 58th Street, Room 1017, New York, NY 10019.

Penny Perkins is a writer in New York City.

SPECIAL EVENT
FILMMAKER NINA ROSENBLUM
AT DRYDEN WITH "THROUGH THE WIRE"
FRI. JULY 20 8 PM

6/26/90
10 P.M.
CH.21 WXXI

Esquire Magazine
Husbands Owners' Manual

Actions: Seneca Falls July 15
11:00

Actions: Individual
Bike Rides

Announcements: exclusively for women
Radio Station - (51% (name of program)
WXXI Russel
call

Women + Cows Conference
Wild Seeds
NOW
U of R

• NEXT MEETING:
Monday 16th 7:30
Anne Seale's

KNOW Wham Tactics
* NAME Women Empowered
Challenging Laws + Attitudes Against Women
CLAW CRAAW

sjd * BANK - Coop
✓ P.O. Box ←
✓ APPEAL transcript - Ramona

ACTIONS
NAMES - PHONE TREE ANNE SEALE
sjd * SUSAN JOHN → Kathie Reilly
Ramona Santorelli

July 25th a.m.
26th a.m.

SURVEYS
ANNOUNCEMENTS

(7)

Bay to Lake, turn right

sjd * Sally Jesse Rafael - July 2 (Nina to get info.)
- Men's Breasts

• Actions:
Freezing History
Statues
Leaflets, Posters

Sally Jesse Raphael Show
267 Broadway
New York, NY 14607

Thursday Nite: Cook thru Recycling Bins - June 29

Bare Tits Cruising + Drinking League